

ESSAY • Truthmongerers and Reality Engineers

by PAULA KELLY with philosophical musings by MARC ALSPECTOR-KELLY

I was watching Charlie Rose the other night on TV, interviewing that enfant terrible of New German cinema, Werner Herzog, who seemed to be grappling with the thorny conundrum we've come to know as Truth Vs. Reality in documentary films.

Actually, Werner didn't quite put it in those terms, I mean, Truth Vs. Reality. What he revealed was that he does not make his own documentaries in the realist tradition of cinema vérité. He prefers to, yes, stage events in his documentaries, and then go in there, like an angry hornet, and zzzzt zzzzt zzzzt, prod and sting his participants until they do something interesting or important, something worth turning on the camera for. (I may not be remembering exactly how he put it.)

Then he said something like "below the surface" of documentary, there is an "ecstatic truth." Along those lines, anyway. I took down some notes, creating a document, if you will, and went to bed.

The next morning, I got up and drank some coffee and thought about Werner Herzog, ecstatic truths and the Nature of Reality. This is bigger than me, I thought, a mere filmmaker trying to get by. What can we really know, unless you're Werner, about these tediously profound questions that seem to follow us everywhere, like a trailing cloud of angst, a cloak of inexorable futility, in terms of?

Fortunately, I have a brother in Kalamazoo and it's been much too long since I last called him with an existential matter to resolve. His name is Marc and he teaches philosophy at the University of Western Michigan. He also has three sons under the age of nine.

So I got him on the phone and explained my predicament. If you're not Werner Herzog, how do you begin to address the prickly matter of Truth Vs. Reality? He understood the problem immediately, and once we got going, it turned out to be surprisingly simple to figure the whole thing out.

Paula: Why don't we start with definitions? What is Truth? No, wait a

minute. Let's start with something easy.

Marc: Yeah. I suppose we should consider what Documentary means. Hold on a minute. (Daddy's talking on the phone. No, Daniel, I can't do that with you. Not now, okay? I have to do this thing on the phone right now. Okay, I love you too.)

Paula: Are you still there?

Marc: Okay, so where were we?

Paula: Is this a good time for you?

As things turned out, it really wasn't the best time for Marc, because he had a small boy running in and out of the room. So I sent him an email with some questions and the results of our investigation went like this:

What is a documentary?

Paula: Okay, let me tackle this one. A documentary is a series of moving image sequences edited together to represent some sort of semblance of reality (whatever that means, and I think Stephen Hawking would agree with me). Alternately, a documentary is a cinematic structure for conveying some kind of underlying truth about an individual or set of circumstances. A documentary is—sigh. Why don't you give it a shot?

Marc: Seems to me that the distinction between a documentary and a fictional film is one of degree rather than kind, that there is a continuum between them. That doesn't make the distinction illegitimate; the colors red and green lie on a continuum, but that doesn't mean that the concepts of red and green aren't perfectly good concepts. At any rate, there are at least two dimensions to the continuum.

First, there are the specific, particular, facts, the verifiable details, that provide the building-blocks out of which the documentary is made: a person's name, where they went to school, what they did for a living, etc.

But a documentary rarely consists of just these; it will introduce other elements that are not so obviously based on historical record (what the person looked like when asked a certain question, what they wore at a particular event, the nuances of their relationship with their spouse/partner, etc.) On the other hand, even a “pure” work of fiction will build on at least various general facts (about what people are generally like, for example). A fiction that includes no elements from real life that the audience can recognize from their own experience would be incomprehensible.

Second, there is the story built out of those detailed facts. Reality does not come packaged in stories with theme, beginning, middle, and end; and there are inevitably too many facts to be represented (the number of teeth a person has at a particular age, for example, is not likely to be relevant). The documentary film-maker has to construct that story, in part, by selecting, ordering, and presenting those particulars. But as with the detailed facts out of which the story is constructed, the story itself can be more or less faithful to the subject-matter, in much the way that a news report can be more or less faithful to which events are significant enough to warrant reporting. This kind of fidelity is difficult to assess, and likely to be subject to interpretation. But a documentary nevertheless claims such fidelity; that is one of the differences between it and a work of fiction.

Can a documentary tell the truth?

Paula: Well, what are the options here? That a documentary can't tell the truth? What the hell are we doing with all this footage?

Marc: Telling the truth here will correspondingly demonstrate the two dimensions presented above: accuracy in the particular, detailed facts out of which the story is constructed, and fidelity of the story constructed out of those facts to the documentary's subject-matter.

What is truth anyway?

Paula: My cats, when they play together. Actually, that could be a docu-

mentary and every minute would be absolutely true.

Marc: Again, the same two dimensions are relevant. With respect to the particular, detailed facts, truth is mundane: if the documentary's narrator says that its subject was born in 1844, then what the film claims is true if its subject was indeed born in 1844. But when it comes to the story itself, the truth is harder to characterize. Do the facts selected for presentation, and does the order in which they are presented, fairly represent the history of the documentary's subject-matter? Is the story a true story? It is harder to see here what in reality corresponds to this. Perhaps in this case the truth is not so much a matter of accurate representation of an objective reality, but is instead more a matter of agreement among a reasonably wide and diverse number people who are familiar with the subject-matter.

Can a documentary ever really truly reflect reality?

Paula: My answer is a question. What, in fact, is the meaning of reality in curved space-time as it represents the history of the universe? Is reality a relative perceptual experience unique to each one of us, and therefore different from anyone else's “experience” of the world? Is it enough to say there's a consensus about any observable phenomenon such that it is, by human definition, reality? That's three questions.

Marc: With respect to detailed facts, surely they don't depend on perception. (When someone was born doesn't depend on when anyone thinks they were born, e.g.) But the fidelity of the overall story looks more like it is dependent to some degree on the perceiver. There are just too many particular facts to present all of them (imagine how many true sentences you can construct just by describing the room around you, for example; an infinite number, no doubt), and they don't of themselves coalesce into a thematically organized story. So whether the story itself is accurate may be, to some extent, in the eye of the perceiver. (On the other hand, there is surely a limit to this; a sensitive, carefully researched documentary can tell a story that more accurately represents reality than a complete fabrication.)

Does truth have anything to do with reality?

Paula: Depends on who you talk to.

Marc: Yes, but the relation can be complex. With particular facts, truth just is accurate representation of reality (again, “she was born in 1844” is true if she was in reality born in 1844). But with the story itself built on those truths, whether it reflects reality may indeed depend somewhat on who you talk to. (See above.)

Can documentary get any closer to the truth than, say, poetry or architecture?

Paula: Alright, time to get serious. Of course, you can find truth in documentary films. It’s kind of an accidental moment of revelation--sometimes an unhappy accident, like stubbing your toe, sometimes a happy accident, like believing in God. Although Werner seems to believe that truth lurks under the surface of a documentary, like a

giant catfish trolling around in the Red River, I like to picture it as a shy creature, peeking out from between the branches from time to time. Over to you.

Marc: Yes. I’ve been referring to two dimensions so far. But there’s a third: the kind of truths presented in poetry, architecture, music, etc. Such truths—if that’s the right word to use, which I’m not so sure about—involve some kind of resonance between the work and its audience, which can be more on the emotional, conceptual, or inspirational level than on the cognitive or representative level. Documentaries are just as capable of generating such resonance as are any other works of art. So there are three levels of possible “truth” to capture: the accuracy of particular, detailed facts represented in the documentary; the fidelity of the story it tells in virtue of its selection and presentation of those facts; and the emotional, conceptual, or inspirational resonance it can generate. Unlike works of fiction or poetry, which are perhaps answerable to reality only in the third sense (and perhaps the second, albeit only in a very general way), a documentary is answerable to reality in all three senses.

In virtue of those greater constraints, a documentary is capable of a greater proximity to the truth.

Paula: Thanks Marc. I owe you one.

So, there you have it.

Some might argue that documentary filmmakers are nothing more than truthmongers and reality engineers. My brother Marc would say that “probably no film can occupy either extreme end (of truth or reality); there is no such thing as the pure documentary or pure work of fiction.” As for Werner, well, I believe he is beyond such arcane ideas as truth or reality. He lives on the plane of the spirit of documentary cinema. But that’s a whole other ball game, isn’t it?

Paula Kelly is a writer and filmmaker based in Winnipeg. Her documentary films and dramatic shorts have received various awards and nominations, including the feature documentary *Appassionata*.

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